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INL bus system celebrates 60 years of service

IDAHO FALLS — May 21 marks a special date for Idaho National Laboratory – 60 years to the day since a string of 24 used White Trucking Company school buses first rolled across the eastern Idaho desert, taking workers to the remote National Reactor Testing Station.

Exact figures are hard to come by, but today, roughly 176 million miles and about that many passenger trips later, INL buses still roll across the sagebrush desert each day. Over the years, 52 bus drivers have each achieved 1 million safe driving miles. INL Bus Operations employees will celebrate those achievements and more Saturday night as part of their annual safety recognition banquet.

"It is exciting to be part of such a long and proud tradition," said Scott Wold, INL's Integrated Transportation Services director. "All of our people – drivers, mechanics, repair specialists, dispatchers, technicians and others – take pride in the service they provide to INL."

Today INL's fleet consists of 103 buses, maintained and operated by 116 employees, of which 92 are drivers. The fleet logs more than 2 million miles annually (down from a peak of some 6 million miles yearly in the early 1990s). They haul roughly 2,750 passengers to the Site and back each day. And somewhere across eastern Idaho, an INL bus is on the road, nearly 24 hours per day, seven days a week.

Those first old school buses, known as Green Hornets, went through Blackfoot, the only available route at the time. Later that same year, Highway 20 from Idaho Falls was completed across the desert to Arco, considerably shortening the commute.

In 1951, 16 new Brill buses were purchased. Though more modern, they were inadequate for the harsh Idaho winters. For instance, passengers sitting above the wheel wells discovered their wet shoe soles would freeze to the bus floor.

The bus system grew right along with the INL Site. The Brills were followed in due time by other buses: Flexible (or Flex), Carpenter, (rented) GMC, Crown, Eagle, Gillig, TMC and finally MCI, the workhorse of the fleet today. Each new generation of bus had improvements in capacity, comfort and convenience.

INL workers also did the mechanical, repair and routine maintenance work the buses required. Over the years, the fleet has developed a reputation for having one of the best bus maintenance programs anywhere – a reputation that still holds true today.

In the mid-1970s, two-way radios were added, and for the first time, drivers could call for help if their bus broke down, or call for assistance for a traffic accident or stranded vehicle they came across in the desert.

The original bus system was operated by the Lost Rivers Transportation Company – named for the nearby Big Lost and Little Lost rivers. But soon, INL contractors began operating the bus system for themselves, a tradition that continues to this day: Phillips Petroleum Company, Idaho Nuclear Company, Aerojet Nuclear Company, EG&G, Lockheed Martin Idaho Technology Company, Bechtel BWXT Idaho (BBWI), and the current contractor, Battelle Energy Alliance.

A tradition that did not last was that of the all-male bus drivers. Today, 20 of INL's 92 bus drivers are women – including Phyllis Delgado, the most recent Million Mile Safe Driver.

"This shows how far we've come in the 60 years that INL Bus Operations has been here," said Scott Lyman, Bus Operations manager. "Phyllis is among our best drivers. She came on board in a time when there were fewer female bus drivers. We expect in the future to have many more female drivers reach the million-mile mark."

A trend that is in full swing now is the move to a greener, cleaner INL bus fleet. In recent years, 42 older buses have been replaced with new, more fuel-efficient models that also carry more passengers per bus. Additionally, the entire INL bus fleet uses B20 biodiesel fuel, made from 80 percent petroleum products and 20 percent oil from renewable plant sources.

Only last year, INL won the Lean, Clean and Green Award (a GreenGov Presidential Award from the White House) for its work over the past few years in modernizing its fleet, improving fuel efficiency, increasing the use of biobased alternative fuels and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Today's buses are indeed very fuel-efficient, comfortable and convenient. And today's drivers, like their predecessors, are a tough breed.

Most can tell you about a blizzard that stranded them at one INL facility or another, black ice that tested their driving skills, or a range fire that reduced visibility to zero and slowed their pace to a crawl. Such things don't happen every day, but when they do, INL drivers take them in stride. They're just part of the day's work, adding variety and interest to the job they love.

INL is one of the DOE's 10 multiprogram national laboratories. The laboratory performs work in each of DOE's strategic goal areas: energy, national security, science and environment. INL is the nation's leading center for nuclear energy research and development. Day-to-day management and operation of the laboratory is the responsibility of Battelle Energy Alliance.

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